

Mya-Rose Craig. *Birdgirl: Discovering the Power of Our Natural World*. Vintage, 2023

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## REVIEWS

### **Mya-Rose Craig. *Birdgirl: Discovering the Power of Our Natural World*. Vintage, 2023.**

311 pages. Paperback, USD 19.68.  
ISBN: 9781529114317.

MYA-ROSE Craig's second book, *Birdgirl* (first published 2022), is a memoir of her youth. Though the author is still only twenty-two and finishing her undergraduate degree at the University of Cambridge, her book is based on posts from her blog that she started in 2014, aged just twelve. The focus of *Birdgirl* is the Craig family's passion for birding, alternatively known as twitching or birdwatching, and Mya-Rose's highly unusual childhood which involved extensive global travel. A Bangladeshi-Brit, she is increasingly known for her promotion of climate justice, and campaigning for people from VME (Visibly Minority Ethnic) groups engaging in nature. In 2020, at age seventeen, she became the youngest Briton to receive an honorary doctorate. She founded a charity, Black2Nature, which organises summer camps for VME people in Britain, and shared a stage at Cop26 (the 26<sup>th</sup> United Nations Conference on Climate Change) in Glasgow in 2021 with two other girl activists: Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai. Although not as globally recognised, Mya-Rose began blogging three years before Greta Thunberg emerged on the global stage, as the author herself observes (170). This communion with other young activists shows the importance of this generation for galvanising others to care about the natural world. Early in the book Mya-Rose includes an anecdote about how the Spoon-billed Sandpiper bird has been brought back from the brink of extinction due to public awareness and renewed intervention strategies by conservationists. Her own awareness-raising directly contributed to the protection of this rare bird.

As we know from Kate Douglas and Anna Poletti's *Life Narratives and Youth Culture* (2016), blogging, selfies and social media make up some of the most ubiquitous forms of life narrative accessed by young people today. Mya-Rose is also a more traditional life writer: in writing *Birdgirl* she has referred back to diaries that she kept throughout her childhood. There is a rich history of girl writers who were inspired by the natural world, from Dorothy Wordsworth's *The Grasmere Journals* (1800–03) to the *Journal of Emily Shore* (1831–39) and the *Diary of Opal*

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*Whiteley* (1903–04). A more obscure example is the juvenilia of Isobel Wylie Hutchison (1889–1982), the Scottish explorer and botanist who published poetry and books describing her travels to Alaska, Iceland, and Greenland. As a child, Hutchison contributed to *The Horticultural Magazine* and later *The Scribbler*, both manuscript magazines created by her and her siblings, covering topics on botany and gardening. Like Hutchison's, Mya-Rose Craig's childhood writing about the natural world was a linchpin of family life.

Mya's encyclopaedic knowledge of birds, and her ability to describe them in accessible ways, communicate a genuine love and warmth. "Twitchers" are also characterised by their obsessiveness and propensity to collect. In 2009 she started a "Big Year"—a competition with herself to see how many birds she could see. Interspersed with stories of world travel and adventure, the memoirs combine nature writing and travel writing. Taken out of primary school for six months, Mya travels to South America for bird-watching across three countries. She recounts stories of chewing on coca leaves to relieve symptoms of altitude sickness and of having to have a maggot extracted from her scalp. She travels across Australia, America, Africa, Indonesia; she sees whales, Komodo dragons, and chimpanzees in their natural habitats—an unintentional perk of her birdwatching voyages.

The memoirs begin not with a picture of Mya-Rose's infancy, but with an account of her family history. She describes how her parents met in a Bristol club in 1995: "The condensation dripped off the vaulted cellar walls as they made eye contact through a throng of gyrating bodies" (7). In imagining her youthful and love-struck parents she demonstrates the importance of shared dynastic histories in children's writing: an aspect that has been identified by the scholars Arianne Baggerman and Kathryn Gleadle. It is unsurprising, therefore, that the young author's parents feature prominently in both the text and the paratext of *Birdgirl*. From a young age, Mya-Rose is aware of her mother's struggle with bipolar disorder. The illness's characteristic fluctuation between mania and depression complicates home life and birding trips, but their shared hobby provides some respite. Mya's sympathetic narration depicts a turbulent family dynamic, her mother's illness amounting to moments of tyranny during their far-flung and already strenuous birding expeditions (264). In a memorable passage, Mya-Rose recounts one of her mother's suicide attempts, and how her father responded by planning another birding trip. Referring to their financial facility to do so, the author comments somewhat jarringly, "I'm a lucky girl, aren't I" (91).

Mya-Rose also depicts the awkwardness that she felt in engaging in her hobby during adolescence. She recounts how during her secondary school IT classes certain pupils would click on online news stories featuring the Craig family and tease Mya-Rose about them, and how she would carefully curate her Instagram account to not exhibit her birding fixation too explicitly, posting pictures of penguins instead of Snow Petrels (226). In her growing activism, she "found it less scary to talk to thousands of people online about systemic racism than to challenge the boy I was sitting next to in maths about his Islamophobia" (274). Eventually, Mya-Rose learns to own her "Birdgirl" sobriquet and not compartmentalise her life. Yet the author is only at the start of her career, and

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*Birdgirl* ends on a note of “anticipation” and “hope” (302), which seems appropriate for a young person who has already achieved so much.

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